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THE SITUATION AND SHORT-TERM  
OUTLOOK IN LAOS

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## THE SITUATION AND SHORT-TERM OUTLOOK IN LAOS

### THE ESTIMATE

#### I. THE SITUATION

1. Laos has never been a national entity governed by sure and united authority. Its people lack a sense of national loyalty and identity and they continue to be divided by traditional ethnic, regional, and family antagonisms. A gulf has always existed between the central government in Vientiane and the people in the countryside, and those who have governed Laos have never established effective authority or won the respect of all of the various peoples who make up the Laotian nation. The non-Communist political factions have never achieved unity or cohesion and have tended to view one another with as much suspicion as they do the Communist left. As a result, no strong, effective non-Communist leadership has emerged since Laos achieved independence. These fundamental weaknesses in the political and social fabric of Laos have been brought again to the surface and accentuated since Kong Le seized control of Vientiane in early August. Indeed, developments since the coup were made possible, almost inevitable, by the incoherent nature of the country, its leaders, and its people. This chaos has been compounded by contradictory and inconsistent Western counsel and by the wide attraction of neutralism, however vaguely understood, among many Laotians.

2. The principal political elements in Laos, aside from the Communist-dominated Pathet Lao—the Souvanna Phouma government in Vientiane, the Revolutionary Committee set up by Phoumi and Boun Oum at Savannakhet, and King Savang at the royal capital of Luang Prabang—have been unwilling to work together. Alone none of them has the fol-

lowing, the national status, and the military strength to contain the Pathet Lao. The Laotian Army, spread thin in small often isolated units, has been uncertain in its loyalties. A majority of the commanders lean to Phoumi and the Revolutionary Committee although some still support Souvanna's government. Others seek to maintain a neutral position in the struggle among the non-Communist factions. Few of them, however, appear willing to fight one another. Some commanders are anti-Pathet Lao and ready to do battle with that enemy.

3. Under cover of the confusion, and taking advantage of both the stalemate among the non-Communist elements and the desire of Souvanna and Kong Le for a negotiated end to the civil conflict, the Pathet Lao have steadily improved their political and military positions. Thus, Kong Le's act of mutiny set in motion a chain of events in Laos which could lead to the country's departure from its western orientation and its entry into the Communist orbit.

4. Kong Le's mutiny and its aftermath have also had deep repercussions in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand and South Vietnam. Thailand's Prime Minister, Sarit, is convinced that either a Communist takeover or the establishment of a neutralist, coalition government in Laos would seriously threaten Thai security. Either development, he feels, would dangerously expose his country to Communist infiltration, subversion, and attack, and would generate strong pressures inside Thailand for a more neutralist policy. Moreover, he believes it would undermine his own personal position. He almost certainly views US policy in the Laotian crisis as providing a

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demonstration of what support he could expect from the US if a Communist coup against his government were to occur. Thus far, he has been most disillusioned by US policy in the Laotian crisis, feeling it to be indecisive and ambiguous.

5. As a result of the developments in Laos and the 11 November coup attempt in Saigon, President Diem of South Vietnam probably has lost some of his confidence in US willingness to support fully his anti-Communist position. He may believe that the Saigon coup effort was at least partly stimulated by Kong Le's coup and the failure of the US to extend General Phoumi full and immediate support. Moreover, these events, coming on the heels of US efforts to convince him to hold less tightly the reins of power in his own government, have probably further undermined his confidence in US judgment. From Diem's point of view, an anti-Communist Laos provides some shield against a North Vietnamese attack, and southern Laos, at least, must be kept in anti-Communist hands to avoid critically exposing his own borders to infiltration and attack.

6. The outcome of the immediate crisis, insofar as internal considerations apply, rests primarily with the interplay of the intentions and capabilities of the major Laotian elements: Souvanna, Phoumi, the King, Kong Le, and the Pathet Lao.

7. *Souvanna*. Compared with other Laotian politicians, Souvanna has considerable personal prestige and appeal among the peoples of Laos. He is still Prime Minister, but he controls no organized political apparatus, he lacks administrative control of the countryside and command of the Laotian military, and he is not trusted by the King. A quorum of the National Assembly, chosen in highly corrupt elections in May of 1960, remains in Vientiane, but almost certainly a number of its members, if free of duress, would oppose Souvanna or defect to the Phoumi group.

8. Souvanna is neutralist and leftist, but we do not believe that he is a Communist. Souvanna's leadership qualities are weakened by his impulsiveness, willful disregard of un-

pleasant facts, and over-weening self-confidence, particularly with regard to his ability to deal with and control the Pathet Lao. He believes most of the Pathet Lao to be patriots who, once reintegrated into Laotian political and social life, would lose their Communist coloration. Those few hardcore types who would remain Communists, he states, could be kept in check. Accordingly, the only feasible solution for Laos, in Souvanna's mind, is a negotiated settlement with the Pathet Lao along the lines of the 1957 agreement, and a neutral foreign policy. Souvanna is moving Laos in the direction that he has maintained for several years it should move. However, we believe that it is moving at a faster pace than Souvanna would countenance if he were master of his government and free from the pressures Kong Le and the Pathet Lao exert on him in Vientiane.

9. Early in the crisis, Souvanna apparently had hoped to strengthen his negotiating position vis-a-vis the Pathet Lao. He was unable to use Kong Le to this end because Kong Le tended to be more amenable to the Pathet Lao than to Souvanna. At one time Souvanna probably believed that a combination of Kong Le and Pathet Lao military pressure on the one hand, and US political pressure on Phoumi on the other, would force the latter to capitulate, thus restoring his government's authority over the troops and areas controlled by the Revolutionary Committee. Although he has attempted to open negotiations with the Boun Oum-Phoumi group, his conditions have been unattractive to Phoumi, and, at times, seemed to be calculated insults. Recently Souvanna has attempted to strengthen his position by recruiting several new battalions of troops in Vientiane. However, these units are probably infiltrated by the Pathet Lao.

10. Souvanna also hoped to win over the troops in the Luang Prabang area which had attempted to maintain a neutral position. However, this hope was dashed by the pro-Savannakhet coup of 10 November and the subsequent defection of General Ouan to Savannakhet. This was a serious blow to Souvanna, and he attempted to compensate for it by drawing closer to the Communists in

both the domestic and international spheres. On 17 November, his government and the Communist Neo Lao Hak Xat announced an agreement to establish a national coalition government including representatives of the NLHX. The agreement also provided that the government would soon accept aid from Communist China and North Vietnam and would send a delegation to those countries to negotiate for exchange of economic and cultural relations, for the re-establishment of telecommunications with North Vietnam, and for the immediate opening of the Laos-China border. On 29 November, Souvanna's cabinet named a 10-man friendship mission, headed by the Prime Minister, for a visit to Peiping and Hanoi beginning 10 December. Deliveries of Soviet food and POL to Vientiane have begun and a 3-man Soviet Embassy staff has taken up residence in Vientiane.

11. Thus, Souvanna now relies very heavily upon the support of pro-Communist and Kong Le elements. It appears that this will continue, and that as opposition to him mounts he will keep on seeking broader and more specific support from the Communist Bloc. Souvanna probably still hopes to keep Communist influence in check, but some of his measures to protect his position by moving closer to the Communists are irrevocable, and most, if not all, of them have been highly favorable to future Communist domination of the Vientiane Government.

12. *Phoumi*. The position of Phoumi, and of the Revolutionary Committee he has set up with Boun Oum, has a number of serious weaknesses. In southern Laos, there are about 7,500 combat troops, most of whom are under commanders probably loyal to Phoumi. Most of these troops are scattered widely through the area, and have their hands full attempting to cope with local Pathet Lao activities. In the Thakhet-Savannakhet area, Phoumi has about 1,500 troops. He is in the process of recruiting and organizing an additional battalion. It is unlikely that Phoumi's troops without continued US assistance could or would offer very strong or effective resistance to a determined attack on their positions by Vientiane and Pathet Lao forces.

13. Phoumi's military capabilities have markedly increased since he received additional US aid and moral support. Moreover, the pro-Savannakhet coup of 10 November in Luang Prabang greatly improved Phoumi's military and political positions. Nearly all the commanders in the Luang Prabang region have pledged their support to him. Several small units operating against the Pathet Lao in Sam Neua are being supplied by Phoumi and are probably responsive to his guidance. Phoumi is handicapped, however, by poor communications with these units. In Xiang Khouang, the militant Meo tribesmen are being supplied with arms by Phoumi and are currently conducting effective anti-Pathet Lao operations.

14. The Revolutionary Committee probably has some political appeal in southern Laos. Boun Oum is a member of the Royal Family of Champassak which ruled southern Laos until Laos was united by the French following the Second World War. However, we believe that Boun Oum and Phoumi lack broad political appeal outside the south. Phoumi's loss of prestige among both political and military leaders in Laos as a result of the Kong Le coup has been only partially made up by the Luang Prabang coup and General Ouan's defection. Moreover, Phoumi has in the past proved to be an undependable and, at times, careless military leader, highly ambitious and opinionated.

15. Phoumi's motivations in the present situation are probably a combination of personal pride and anti-Communist convictions. He is frustrated by what he believes to be inadequate US support and an ambiguous US policy. However, he probably has never intended to come to terms with Souvanna and probably has felt that the US would, in the final analysis, support him. He would like to retake Vientiane by force and almost certainly has plans for such an operation.

16. *King Sarang*. The King appears to have no personal courage. He has been extremely careful to stay within constitutional limits and he has never asserted, openly and clearly, his potential authority and influence. Although it is quite clear that he distrusts

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Souvanna and desires Souvanna's resignation, thus far he has been unwilling to take any overt steps to this end. The Revolutionary Committee at Savannakhet received the King's private approval, and the 10 November coup in Luang Prabang probably had his blessing, although thus far he has been careful to avoid associating himself with either. It is possible that the King has played a significant behind-the-scenes role in the anti-Souvanna plotting and maneuvering. It is unlikely, however, that he will openly take a strong personal stand, or one which he believes would endanger the position of the monarchy.

17. *Kong Le.* There is some circumstantial evidence that Kong Le may have plotted his coup with Souvanna. However, Kong Le's August revolt apparently was conceived and executed on very short notice, and it may have been a decision made primarily by Kong Le himself. He probably was motivated largely by personal grievances arising from the way in which his 2nd Paratroop Battalion—the best combat unit in the Lao armed forces—had been treated. The revolt has assumed proportions which Kong Le probably did not anticipate and which have been beyond his ability to cope with. He has now become so implicated with Souvanna and the Pathet Lao that he probably cannot turn back. Although there have been some indications that his control over his troops has been weakened, Kong Le is still an important element in the situation and could still rally a considerable number of troops to his personal command.

18. The role of Kong Le with respect to the activities of the Souvanna government is not clear. Until recently, it appeared that he exercised a veto power over those political and military decisions of the Souvanna government which he considered important to him. Now, however, it appears that his direct influence on the government is being usurped by the Pathet Lao. Although Kong Le has limited Souvanna's freedom of action, it is also clear that Souvanna has used Kong Le.

19. Shortly after the coup, Kong Le critically compromised his position with respect to the Pathet Lao when he distributed the arms stored in Vientiane to villagers, including many Pathet Lao, in the surrounding area. Although he probably did this to build strength against a possible attack from Luang Prabang and Savannakhet, once the arms were distributed his favorable balance of military power in the Vientiane area vis-a-vis the Pathet Lao was lost. Whatever his own wishes may have been, Kong Le has become increasingly a captive of the Pathet Lao. If Souvanna were to lose out and an anti-Pathet Lao government take over, Kong Le would probably join the Pathet Lao.

20. *The Pathet Lao.* The hand of the Pathet Lao has been strengthened greatly by events since the Kong Le coup. Any figures concerning the strength of their armed guerrillas are highly speculative. It is almost certain that their number is higher than at any time in the past. We estimate their present strength to be between 4,000 and 8,000. They have obtained considerable arms and ammunition from Kong Le and as a result of capturing equipment during the rout of Phoumi's forces at Paksane and their defeat and disarming of the Sam Neua garrison. They probably have been reinforced by cadres recently trained in North Vietnam, and they probably have concentrated increasing numbers of troops in the areas around Vientiane, Thakhet-Savannakhet, Phong Saly, and Luang Prabang. The Pathet Lao and Vientiane forces in the Vientiane area are deployed in such a manner as to either defend or attack the city, and the forces facing Phoumi along the Nam Ca Dinh line are of both Pathet Lao and Vientiane units. At present, anti-Pathet Lao operations are going on only in Phong Saly and Xieng Khouang.

21. The Pathet Lao probably view the developing situation as a golden opportunity either to force acceptance of their participation in the government and their foreign policy demands, or to seize control of Laos by armed action if they conclude that they can do so quickly and without risking outside intervention. We do not believe that the Pathet Lao—

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or Peiping and Hanoi—are likely to let this opportunity pass. The longer the present crisis continues, the better the Pathet Lao will be able to consolidate their political and military positions.

22. They would prefer to gain their objectives through negotiations and political action because this would reduce the chances of outside intervention. Events since the Kong Le coup have moved along lines favorable to such tactics. They have profited greatly from disunity among the non-Communist political and military leaders. Moreover, they hold Vientiane virtually a hostage and have been able to exert considerable leverage on Souvanna and Kong Le, and Quinim, the most influential member of the government after Souvanna himself, has apparently become their tool.

23. Although Pathet Lao tactics have emphasized negotiations, psychological pressure, and political action, they have maintained a fairly high level of military pressure on the Laotian armed forces and have built up their guerrilla strength in key areas. This puts them in a favorable position to seize by force large parts of the country, including such key points as Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, the Phong Saiy. If the Pathet Lao were to exert their full guerrilla warfare capabilities, the Laotian armed forces, in their present disorganized condition, probably could not prevent the loss of large parts of the country and a number of key towns.

## II. POSSIBLE FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

24. If present trends continue, the situation in Laos will remain one of confusion, drift, and disintegration. Ultimately this would probably result in the fragmentation of the country, with the Communists, supported by the Bloc, assuming control over most of the north and the Revolutionary Committee attempting to set up a separate state in the south. Without large amounts of outside assistance, a separate southern Laos probably would not survive for long.

25. We believe it more likely, however, that the pace of events will quicken over the next

few weeks and, barring a quick victory by the Phoumi forces, that the situation either will move toward some form of political settlement or will degenerate into widespread civil war. Although a political settlement based on a compromise agreement between the Vientiane and Savannakhet groups may still be possible, we believe that odds are against it. Souvanna and Phoumi are not likely to find mutually acceptable terms for cooperation at this late point in their conflict. Any negotiations held between them are not likely to be conducted in good faith. Although it is conceivable that the King might be induced to exert more influence than he has in the past, we do not believe he can be induced to take personal charge of the situation. Moreover, we do not believe that Souvanna is likely to resign voluntarily. If an effort is made to upset his government by calling a special meeting of the National Assembly in Luang Prabang to pass a no-confidence motion, Souvanna could maintain that the deputies and the King, as prisoners of rebel forces, were acting under duress. He could declare their act illegal and invalid, and maintain that he was the legal head of the government. If, on the other hand, Souvanna were forced out by political pressures, the Pathet Lao would probably step up sharply their military activity. Consequently, it is probable that any political measures to oust Souvanna will be ineffectual unless enforced by military means.

26. Thus, we believe that Laos is heading toward civil war, with supporters of the Souvanna government—primarily the Pathet Lao and the followers of Kong Le—on one side and anti-Pathet Lao elements and supporters of the Savannakhet group on the other. The conflict could be triggered by a Phoumi attack on Vientiane or by a Souvanna or a Kong Le-Pathet Lao attack on Luang Prabang. Both sides have major problems of logistics, communications, and transport. The struggle would probably be one of widely-scattered, small-unit operations in which the staying power, the training, and the relatively shorter supply lines from North Vietnam would give the Pathet Lao guerrillas an advantage. Without extensive outside assistance, the Phoumi forces would probably soon collapse.



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leaving the country open to early domination by the Communists.

27. If no political settlement is reached between Phoumi and Souvanna, the US may soon be faced with the following situations: (a) A Souvanna solution, which would gravely risk ultimate Communist supremacy. This would involve serious adverse consequences for the US position in Southeast Asia, and over the longer run, would greatly facilitate Communist subversion, infiltration, and expansion in Southeast Asia. (b) A widespread civil war in which the Phoumi forces almost certainly could not prevail or even survive without extensive outside assistance. Such assistance to Phoumi in a civil war situation would probably prompt a Souvanna appeal to the UN and would risk the introduction of North Vietnamese or even Chinese Communist "volunteers." While at least initially, extensive assistance to Phoumi in a civil war would not have the support of the Western members of SEATO or possibly of most Free World opinion, if successful it would strengthen the SEATO area against further Communist aggression.

28. Even if the various non-Communist factions surmount the immediate crisis by a political settlement, the fundamental politi-

cal and social problems of Laos will remain and, as a result of recent events, will probably be more acute than before. Pathet Lao armed strength will be greater and more Communist footholds established in villages throughout the country. Solutions to the fundamental problems, if indeed there are solutions, can be worked out only over a long period of time. Meanwhile, the urgent threats of the Pathet Lao on one hand and the centrifugal force of non-Communist disunity on the other, will operate against the solution of long-term problems.

29. Consequently, we believe that any non-Communist government assuming power in the wake of the present crisis would, in time, face very heavy pressure to move toward a neutralist position and Pathet Lao integration into the political life of the country, or face the likelihood of the situation gravitating again toward civil war. It will be extremely difficult for the non-Communist leaders of Laos to resist this pressure and to contain the Pathet Lao unless they develop a much greater degree of unity, determination, and nationalism than they have in the past, take effective measures to win the loyalty of the peoples of Laos, and receive extensive outside assistance to this end.

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